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ABSTRACT

The interactive effects of implicit normative and explicit situational consensus information were examined regarding the processes of causal attribution and evaluation. Stimulus items were single sentence descriptions of antisocial and prosocial behaviors representing the extremes of high and low normative consensus in each behavior category, as determined from estimates given by a pretest group of "the proportion of people in society who would be likely to perform the behavior described." High and low levels of situational consensus information were created by inserting standard phrases into the sentences indicating that the actor either had many or few co-actors in his immediate context. Subjects (N=151) chose the behavior's "main cause" from three options and then evaluated the actor using a nine-point bipolar scale. It was found that internal attribution frequencies were affected by situational but not by normative consensus, while external attribution frequencies were affected by both kinds of consensus information. Attribution responses also varied as a function of behavior category. Evaluations were affected by normative but not by situational consensus information. Behavior category influenced extremity of evaluation at the low normative consensus level only. Also, internal attributions were generally followed by more extreme evaluations than were external attributions. (Author)

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The Effects of Normative and Situational Consensus Information on Causal Attributions for Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors

by

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According to Kelley (1973, p. 107), "Attribution theory is a theory about how people make causal explanations, about how they answer questions beginning with 'Why?'.". Three principles of the theory are concerned with three different kinds of information used in the process of causal attribution for an observed behavior (Kelley, 1967). The distinctiveness principle refers to the specificity of the behavior; distinctiveness is low or high depending on whether the behavior occurs in response to different stimuli or only one particular stimulus. The principle states that a dispositional or internal (to the actor) causal attribution is more likely when distinctiveness is low, and a situational or external causal attribution is more likely when distinctiveness is high. The consistency principle applies to the stability of the behavior over time; whether or not it is repeated whenever the stimulus is present. According to this principle, internal attribution is more likely when consistency is high, and external attribution is more likely when consistency is low. The consensus principle refers to the behavior of people other than the actor; whether or not their reactions to the stimulus are the same as the actor's. The principle states that internal attribution is more likely when consensus is low, and external attribution is more likely when consensus is high.

In her 1972 experiment, McArthur tested these three principles by combining simple single-sentence descriptions of behaviors with other statements representing counterbalanced manipulations of high and low levels of the three kinds of information. The effects on subjects' causal attributins were such that all three principles were supported. However, in terms of contribution to the overall variance in attribution responses, consensus information had the weakest effect. This unexpected finding prompted further investigation of the importance of the consensus variable in causal attribution and in other judgment processes presumed to involve causal attribution as a mediating step. These experiments yielded conflicting results, so that a controversy presently exists as to what extent the knowledge of other peoples' behavior influences judgments made about a specific individual.

Most of the researchers conducting these investigations have not attended to the interaction between <u>situational</u> consensus information they have manipulated and presented in various ways to their subjects, and the <u>normative</u> consensus information those subjects brought to the decision-making process. Normative consensus information consists of the subjects' estimates of the proportion of people in society who would be expected to

perform the behavior observed or described. Particularly when behaviors have the potential for being evaluated, these two sources of consensus information are sometimes in accord with each other, and sometimes in conflict. For example, what will be the determination of causality for an antisocial or "bad" deed performed with high situational consensus; or for a prosocial or "good" deed performed with low situational consensus? Furthermore, how will such causal attributions influence subjects' evaluations of those deeds and their performers?

Kassin (1979) used the terms "implicit" and "explicit" to differentiate between what I have labeled as normative and situational consensus, respectively. I prefer the latter terms because they refer to the source of the consensus information, and because personal consensus, derived from the observer's judgment of how he or she would behave in the situation, is also implicit.

Previous investigators used the procedure of asking subjects to make causal attributions for potentially harmful behaviors performed by hypothetical participants in psychological experiments. Situational consensus information was operationalized as reports about the behaviors of other "participants" in those experiments. Two examples of the stimulus behaviors are administering dangerous shocks to a confederate and refusing to help someone having an epileptic seizure. Miller et al. (1973)

and Nisbett and Borgida (1975) found no effect, while Wells and Harvey (1977) and Kassin (1977) found a pronounced effect of the situational consensus information on causal attributions. The possible influence of normative consensus information was not taken into account by those researchers in interpreting their results.

Noting this lack of attention to normative consensus, Lowe and Kassin (1977) modified the above procedure to incorporate that variable. In their study the antisocial behavior to be judged was the supposed experimental participant's refusal to help a confederate staple papers. Time contingencies, politeness of the confederate, and other factors were manipulated to create different versions of the incident, which were then rated for frequency of expected helping by a pilot group. Versions representing different levels of normative consensus were combined with situational consensus information (reports of proportions of helpers among all the "participants"). The result was that normative and not situational consensus information affected subjects' causal attributions and evaluations.

The findings of the studies cited above present a confusing picture of the interaction between the two kinds of consensus information in affecting causal attributions for antisocial behaviors. Furthermore, none of these experiments involved examples of prosocial behaviors, for

which normative consensus judgments are also possible.

In the present study normative consensus ratings were obtained for a variety of both antisocial and prosocial behaviors. Those behaviors which were rated at the extremes of high and low normative consensus in each behavior category were combined with high and low situational consensus information. It was expected that both kinds of consensus information would influence subjects' causal attributions and evaluations of the actors.

Subjects

The subjects were 151 undergraduate males who participated to fulfill a course requirement. Prior to their participation, they were informed of the nature of the experiment and asked to sign an "informed consent" form. This procedure and the experimental procedures had been approved by the "University Committee of Investigations Involving Human Subjects".

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in two parts. In Part 1 the normative consensus ratings were collected. Part 2 was the attribution and evaluation study. For both parts, the subjects participated in two large group sessions held on successive evenings. All instructions were given in written form only, and the responses were recorded on mark-

sense answer sheets.

In Part 1, 97 subjects each received a random selection of 80 of 140 single sentence descriptions of antisocial and prosocial interpersonal behaviors. Varying levels of potential harm to the "target" person characterized the antisocial items. The prosocial items involved varying levels of risk incurred, or sacrifice of time, effort, goods, etc. on the part of the actor in order to benefit the target person. A variety of common male first names were used for the actors and targets, and subjects were informed that repetitions of names did not denote the same persons.

For each item subjects first indicated their judgments of "the proportion of people in society who would perform the behavior" using a 10-point scale marked off in equal percentage-range intervals from 0-10% to 90-100%. Their second response was an evaluation of the behavior using a 9-point scale with "most bad" and "most good" endpoints and a "neutral" midpoint. The purpose of this second scale was to ensure that the classification of the behaviors as bad deeds or good deeds conformed to the perceptions of the subjects.

The items with the 10 lowest and 10 highest Part 1 mean normative consensus ratings in each behavior category were chosen for Part 2. As had been expected, bad deeds were generally rated lower in normative consensus than

good deeds. The means of the two groups of high normative consensus items were 4.82 for bad deeds and 7.98 for good deeds. The low normative consensus items had means of 1.74 for bad deeds and 3.72 for good deeds.

Each of the four categories of items was further divided into two 5-item groups of behaviors for assignment to a situational consensus condition. This division was done in such a way as to make the high and low situational consensus groups of items as similar as possible in means and ranges of normative consensus ratings. The phrases "and almost all the others" and "was almost the only one who" were inserted into the sentences to represent high and low situational consensus information. In all there were eight experimental conditions, each comprised of five items, in a randomized block factorial (Kirk, 1968) 2x2x2 design (bad vs. good deed x high vs. low normative consensus x high vs. low situational consensus).

The 54 Part 2 subjects each received a unique random order of the 40 items. For each item, three causal attribution choices were available.

A. Something about (name of actor) probably caused him to behave as he did toward (name of target).

B. Something about (name of target) probably caused (name of actor) to behave as he did.

C. Something about the particular circumstances probably caused (name of actor) to behave as he did toward (name of target).

The subjects were instructed to choose the behavior's

"main cause or most important reason for happening". Following this choice, they evaluated the actor using the same 9-point bipolar evaluation scale used in Part 1.

Results

Four analyses of variance were performed, with the dependent variables being the frequencies of attribution to the three causal sources and the mean evaluation per condition. The evaluation responses were examined so as to compare items from different conditions for extremity of evaluation, or distance away from the scale's "neutral" midpoint.

The analysis of variance of actor attribution frequencies yielded significant effects of behavior category and situational consensus. There were significantly more actor attributions for bad deeds than for good deeds, F (1, 371) = 20.25, $p<.001$, and for low situational consensus behaviors than for high situational consensus behaviors, F (1, 371) = 158.89, $p<.001$. Normative consensus had no significant effect on frequencies of actor attribution, however.

The analysis of variance of target attribution frequencies revealed a significant main effect of situational consensus, such that target attribution occurred more often when situational consensus was high than when it was low, F (1, 371) = 50.04, $p<.001$. There was also a significant interaction between normative consensus and behavior

category, F (1, 371) = 15.14, $p < .001$. In the analysis of the simple main effects of this interaction, it was found that there were significantly more target attributions for good deeds than for bad deeds in the low normative consensus condition, but the reverse was true in the high normative consensus condition.

Main effects of all three independent variables were found in the analysis of variance of circumstance attribution frequencies. High situational consensus information produced more circumstance attributions than low situational consensus, F (1, 371) = 70.38, $p < .001$. Although there were significant main effects of behavior category and normative consensus, those two variables were also involved in a significant interaction, F (1, 371) = 10.73, $p < .005$. Analysis of the simple main effects revealed that there were significantly more circumstance attributions for good deeds than for bad deeds at both levels of normative consensus. There were also significantly more circumstance attributions for high normative consensus good deeds than for low normative consensus good deeds, however the frequency of circumstance attribution for the bad deeds particularly was not affected by normative consensus. Thus the main effect of normative consensus mentioned above was entirely due to the variance in circumstance attribution frequencies given for the good deeds.

The findings of the analysis of variance of the mean evaluation of the actor in each condition were significant

effects of normative consensus and behavior category. There was also a significant interaction between those two variables, F (1, 371) = 10.29, $p < .001$. Analysis of the simple main effects revealed that evaluations were more extreme for low normative consensus behaviors than for high normative consensus behaviors in both categories of behaviors. However, the actors were significantly more extremely evaluated for bad deeds than for good deeds at the low normative consensus level only. Situational consensus information did not significantly affect the variance in evaluations as determined by this method of analysis.

In another method of analysis, the subjects' evaluations for each item were separated according to prior attribution choice. Within each category of causal attribution, evaluations were then averaged for the five items in each condition. It was found that mean evaluations were more extreme when preceded by actor attributions than when preceded by target or circumstance attributions for seven out of the eight conditions. Good deeds at high levels of both consensus factors were the exception, in that mean evaluations following actor and target attributions were about the same for those behaviors.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, situational consensus information

significantly influenced all three types of causal attribution. This result is in conflict with the finding of no effect of situational consensus information in the studies by Miller et al., Nisbett and Borgida, and Lowe and Kassin cited earlier. As Kassin (1979) has pointed out, the method of operationalizing situational consensus information seems to determine its effectiveness in the causal attribution process. Reports of how most people behaved during psychological experiments were probably not used as consensus information by subjects in the above studies. As demonstrated by Wells and Harvey (1977), such reports were used as consensus information only when sample selection procedures and their implications were clearly explained to subjects.

Despite being less influential than the situational consensus information, the implicit normative consensus information in the present study clearly did have an effect on causal attribution. That effect was to influence the choice between the two types of external causal attribution, which together outnumbered the actor attributions. Unfortunately, most of the experiments cited previously did not involve procedures which distinguished between target and circumstance attribution. The results reported here indicate that this is an important distinction.

In assessing the effects of behavior category on causal attribution, it was concluded that internal attri-

bution was in general more likely for antisocial behaviors than for prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, when external attributions were made, the two categories of behaviors were treated quite differently by subjects in determining the choice between target and circumstances.

Close inspection of the evaluation results suggests that the influence of situational consensus information on the evaluation responses was subtle and complex. For the prosocial behaviors in both normative consensus conditions and for the high normative consensus antisocial behaviors, mean evaluations of the actors were more extreme in the low situational consensus condition. For the potentially very harmful low normative consensus antisocial behaviors, actors were more extremely evaluated when situational consensus was high, suggesting a censure for conformity effect.

Other evidence indicating that situational consensus information did at least indirectly affect evaluations was mentioned previously. Evaluations following actor attributions, which were made on the basis of situational and not normative consensus, were more extreme than evaluations following either type of external attribution.

In the evaluation process as it was investigated in the present study, normative consensus was clearly the more important of the two kinds of consensus information. This result is in accord with the evaluation findings of

most of the studies cited earlier, in which the performers of presumably low normative consensus antisocial behaviors were evaluated very negatively despite high situational consensus information. One experiment in which there was an effect of situational consensus information on evaluation was that of Wells and Harvey. However, the single example of antisocial behavior they used was the failure to help someone having a seizure. Condensed as the sentence, "Andy made no attempt to help Jim when Jim was having an epileptic seizure.", that behavior received a mean normative consensus rating in Part 1 of the present experiment which was not low enough to qualify it for use in the Part 2 attribution and evaluation study. This suggests two considerations for future investigations of causal attribution or evaluation processes. First, a researcher's assumptions about the normative consensus of a given behavior may not represent the judgment of the majority of people in a subject population. Second, procedures in which subjects respond to a variety of stimulus behaviors may be preferable to use of a single behavior.

Finally, the effect of behavior category on evaluation of the actor in the present study was noted earlier. Actors were more extremely evaluated for antisocial behaviors than for prosocial behaviors, but only at the low normative consensus level. There is an explanation for this finding. The Part 1 items describing very risky life-saving actions

received positive evaluations that were as extreme as the negative evaluations of some of the low normative consensus antisocial behaviors. However, those heroic deeds also received mean normative consensus ratings that were not low enough to allow thier use in the Part 2 study. The prosocial behaviors that did receive mean normative consensus ratings low enough to use in Part 2 did not receive the most positive evaluations. And the individual item means of the evaluations given by the Part 2 subjects were remarkably close to those obtained in Part 1, especially when they followed actor attributions.

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